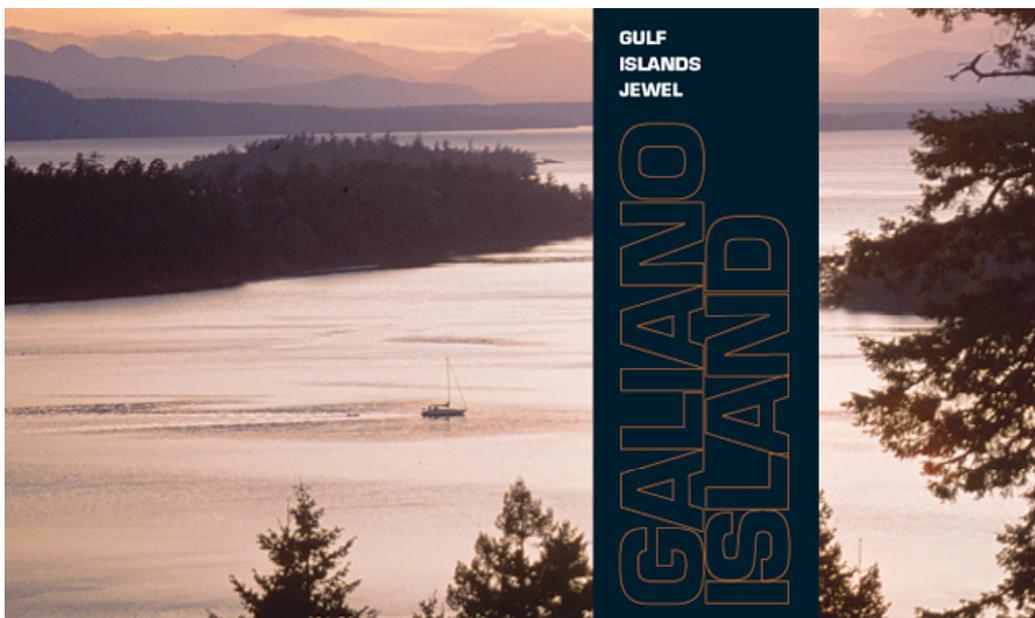


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Is this your first time on Galiano?" asked the cashier at the Daystar Market. My husband and I were stocking up for a picnic: fresh goat cheese from nearby Salt Spring Island and rye bread studded with sun-dried tomatoes from local baker Emily's Breads. We paused, our arms full of bags, and nodded our affirmation, even though we sensed she knew the answer to the question.

She nodded in return and smiled. "You'll be back."

We'd come to Galiano Island, the longest and skinniest of B.C.'s Gulf Islands, for a few days in late summer. Galiano is all stretch

and no sag, 17 miles long but less than 4 miles wide. The ferries dock at Sturdies Bay, near the southern tip, and the bumpy two-lane roads curving north fade into the brush before reaching the northern end. But nobody tours the island by car; you go on foot, bicycle, or — best of all — by kayak.

The major luxury destination is the Galiano Oceanfront Inn and Spa, where guests can indulge in massages, shop for British Columbia vintages in the wine shop, and enjoy outstanding meals made with locally sourced produce, meats, and seafood at Atrevida Restaurant. But the island as a whole is unabashedly easy going — meaning it's where people go to take it easy.

Which we did one fine morning, strapping on life jackets at the Montague Harbour Marina and wriggling into two wobbly sea kayaks for a guided tour. Fish leapt out of the water. A blue heron flapped its broad wings before squawking at us and lifting into the air. We paddled lazily past a “bakery boat” (a 1928 car ferry that now sells freshly baked bread, pies, and cinnamon buns), and around the peninsula of Montague Harbour Marine Provincial Park.

Hundreds of years ago, First Nations people still lived around Montague Harbour. They enjoyed the local shellfish just as much as the oyster catchers did and left behind enormous middens of discarded shells. Ground down by the waves, the middens have become blinding white-shell beaches, dazzling against the turquoise-blue water; one of these is located on the north side of the park.

As we slowly rounded the peninsula, gnarled madrona trees leaned far out over the water, their glossy dark leaves glinting in the sunlight and their red bark peeling to reveal pale-yellow trunks underneath. “If it's quiet and you listen carefully, you can hear the bark cracking and coming off,” said our guide. “It's like it's talking to you.”

Back on shore, we made our way up to Bodega Ridge Provincial Park, purchased for preservation in 1995 and now home to raptors like falcons and eagles. We walked along the stony cliff

that gives the park its name, shuddering a bit at the steep dropoff but marveling at the 180-degree view of mountains, islands, and shimmering water. On the edge of a ridge, under an ancient, twisted madrona, we encountered another couple sitting and admiring the view. Far off to the southwest, just below the Olympics, a tiny white ferry slid toward Victoria.

“We have to leave on one of those tonight,” sighed the couple, watching the boat. “But we’ll be back.”

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— by Caroline Cummins

http://usairwaysmag.com/2007_08/vancouver.php